



who has written five Holmes mystery novels and two one-man shows about Holmes, Conan Doyle “wanted to prove that he was more than just a mystery writer, a man who made puzzles for a cardboard character to solve. He was desperate to cut the shackles of Sherlock from him,” so much so that in 1893, Conan Doyle sent Holmes plummeting to his death over the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland along with Professor Moriarty.

But less than a decade later—during which Conan Doyle wrote a series of swashbuckling pirate stories and a novel, among other works, which were received with indifference—popular demand, and the promise of generous remuneration, eventually persuaded him to resuscitate the detective, first in the masterful novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, which appeared in 1901, then in a spate of less well-regarded stories that he continued writing until he died of a heart attack in 1930 at age 71. In addition to the Holmes stories, Conan Doyle had written some 60 works of nonfiction and fiction, including plays, poetry and such science-fiction classics as *The Lost World*, and amassed a fortune of perhaps \$9 million in today’s dollars. “Conan Doyle never realized what he’d created in Sherlock Holmes,” says Davies. “What would he say today if he could see what he spawned?”

LATE ONE MORNING, I head for the neighborhood around St. Paul’s Cathedral and walk along the Thames, passing underneath the Millennium Bridge. In *The Sign of Four*,

Holmes and Watson set off one evening on a “mad, flying manhunt” on the Thames in pursuit of a villain escaping in a launch. “One great yellow lantern in our bows threw a long, flickering funnel of light in front of us,” Conan Doyle wrote. The pursuit ends in “a wild and desolate place, where the moon glimmered upon a wide expanse of marshland, with pools of stagnant water and beds of decaying vegetation.” Today the muddy riverbank, with rotting wooden pilings protruding from the water, still bears faint echoes of that memorable chase.

I cross St. Paul’s churchyard, wind through alleys and meet Johnson in front of the stately Henry VIII gate at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. Founded in 1123 by a courtier of Henry I, Barts is located in Smithfield, a section of the city that once held a medieval execution ground. There, heretics and traitors, including the Scottish patriot William Wallace (portrayed by Mel Gibson in the film *Braveheart*), were drawn and quartered. The square is surrounded by public houses—one half-timbered structure dates to Elizabethan times—that cater to workers in the Smithfield meat market, a sprawling Victorian edifice with a louvered roof where cattle were driven and slaughtered as late as the 1850s. In the hospital’s small museum, a plaque erected by the Baker Street Irregulars, an American Holmesian group, commemorates the first meeting of Holmes and Watson in the now-defunct chemistry lab.

We end up in Poppins Court, an alley off Fleet Street, which some Holmes followers insist is the Pope’s Court in the story “The Red-Headed League.” In that comic tale, Holmes’ client, the dim-witted pawnbroker Jabez Wilson, answers a newspaper ad offering £4 a week to a man “sound in body and mind” whose only other qualifications are that he must have red hair and be over 21. Wilson applies for the job, along with hundreds of other redheads, in an office building located in an alley off Fleet Street, Pope’s Court. “Fleet Street,” wrote Conan Doyle, “was choked with red-headed folk, and Pope’s Court looked like a coster’s [fruit seller’s] orange barrow.” The job, which requires copying out the Encyclopaedia Britannica for four hours a day, is a ruse to keep Wilson from his pawnshop for eight weeks—while thieves drill into the bank vault next door. Studying a 19th-century map of the district as the lunchtime crowd bustles past us, Johnson has his doubts. “I don’t think Conan Doyle knew about Poppins Court at all, but it’s very convenient,” he says.

Conan Doyle, adds Johnson, “simply invented some places, and what we’re doing is finding real places that could match the invented ones.” Holmes’ creator may have exercised artistic license with London’s streets and markets. But with vivid evocations of the Victorian city—one recalls the fog-shrouded scene Conan Doyle conjures in *A Study in Scarlet*: “a dun-coloured veil hung over the house tops, looking like the reflections of the mud-coloured streets beneath”—he captured its essence like few other writers before or since. ●